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PHILOSOPHY SERIES THREE

6th and 7th Degrees



NUMBER THREE

of a Series of Seven

EXPERIENCING THE DIVINE

(TRACING THE IDEA OF GOD)

WHY MAKE SUCH A STUDY?

The Idea of God in Prehistoric Times ... The Idea of God in the Old Testament ...
The Idea of God in the New Testament ... The Idea of God Since Bible Days

Beloved Companion:

Your wisdom is to be measured only in changes in consciousness. The great missionary Paul spoke of the seventh heaven. All the heavens and all the paradises are only a thought away. Continued training and continued study will prove this to you, now and forevermore. Still there are people who ask:

Why Make Such a Study?

If you are going to try to find the way to a larger experience of the Divine, you cannot consider too carefully what it is you are looking for and what you are likely to discover as you proceed. Human thinking on this subject is extremely vague, and you need at the beginning to get as much of that vagueness out of your thinking as you can. The idea now is to get this whole matter down out of the air, and learn to think of it in terms of everyday experience. You will build up your own experiences, and an intelligible idea of God will grow from them; but it is well at this time to pause and take a careful look at the development of the idea of God through the ages.

Do not fall victim to the idea that it does not matter what one thinks about God, and that no one really knows or can know anything for sure about it anyway. It matters very much what one thinks about God, and there are people who know a great deal about it. YOU can become one of them, but not by any haphazard approach. One often hears careless thinkers say that anyone's personal idea of God is good enough. That depends entirely on whether that person's idea is intelligent, informed, and tested by experience. If so, no one can gainsay it. If it is just a personal notion, anyone has the right to question it.

Let us think about it in terms of something with which you are quite familiar. No doubt you have had your personal idea of someone you had never seen. You pictured to yourself his stature, appearance, manner, and voice, and this idea seemed quite real to you though it was based entirely on assumption. In the course of time you met this person and had an opportunity to observe him for yourself. Then you found that you had entertained no accurate idea of him at all. He was larger or smaller than you had thought. His complexion was lighter or darker. His voice had a different quality, and he used it differently. You had to revise your concept of him on the basis of experience, but from then on you knew you were right.

In the case of God we have no picture or description, and cannot have. We are told that no one has ever seen Him, or can. That places you entirely on your own. You realize now that you have to THINK your way into the realm of spirit, and out to the very perimeter of time, creation, and history. You have to grope your way through the dark, listen in the silence, and do much patient waiting and watching. You note an impulse. You see the operation of a force. You experience a nudge away from the wrong road and toward the right one. You feel the kindling of a warmth in your heart, and find that it gives off a light in your mind. Gradually you build up the beginning of an understanding. However limited to the world of things your experience has been, you are now beginning to explore the world of faith. There you will discover and deal with realities MORE genuine and permanent than any you have ever known before.

But there is something you can and should do even before that. It is to survey, up to the present time, the long development of the idea you are pursuing. You are not to deal with the assumptions of the thoughtless now, but with the things great souls and wise minds have discovered and recorded. You are asking their ideas of God from people who long, long ago went through all this groping and searching, watched and analyzed their experiences, arrived at the best conclusions they could in the light of the knowledge of their times, and left records of their findings to make the searches of others, like you, easier and faster.

This is nothing to be discouraged about. It is only what EVERY searcher after truth has HAD to do FROM THE BEGINNING OF TIME. Think what long, hard roads men have had to travel in their searches for the causes and cures of disease. Think of the long, patient search for the nature of matter, for the secrets of the stars, for new and better ways of communication, and a thousand other things. The development of our electrical wonders, for instance, has reached over the 2500 years since Thales of Miletus observed that force was generated by friction when he rubbed a piece of amber with a woolen rag.

You cannot expect immunity from the requirements that have had to be met by every seeker for light. You may have to be even more patient, for YOU ARE RESEARCHING IN A REALM BEYOND MATERIAL THINGS. Inspiration had much to do with most, perhaps all of the great discoveries of time. You will have its aid in your quest if you want it and will use it.

II. The Idea of God in Prehistoric Times.

Prehistoric days are dim, of course, but they begin to gather a little light as they approach the time when man began to write his story for posterity. Yet pictures, trinkets, and other remains of old civilizations are silent sugges-

tions of man and the life he lived before the beginning of what we call civilization.

Ancient remains have one thing in common with more recent ones. They always bear some evidence of worship. From the first, man seems to have had some recognition of something greater than himself, something divine. He developed his rituals, consecrated his priests, built his temples, and taught his children to stop now and then and look up.

Of course many of these arrangements were crude, for man was in his childhood. He associated strange customs with his religion, and practiced habits that are no longer approved among enlightened peoples, still because he was in his childhood. Through the centuries his ethical standards have kept improving, because he had a religion. As his thought of the Divine has cleared he has become better able to see what is just and right.

He worked out his own names for Deity. Do not think as some do that THIS meant he was worshiping strange gods. In his childlike way he too was seeking for the Infinite Spirit, and he had as good a right as any of us to choose a name for it. Names matter little anyway. Any one of us may be called a half dozen different things, but that has nothing to do with who we are.

There was a time when primitive man thought he found the Divine in the thunder and lightning. The fact that he had not yet learned where to look does NOT mean that he was not making the true quest. One ancient race thought it located God in the sun, that great giver of light and energy to all living things on the earth. The notion was inadequate, of course, but it wasn't bad as far as it went. The important thing was that man was EMBARKED on his search for the Divine.

Primitive man had one condition which was a disadvantage in one way and an advantage in another. He lacked our background of scientific, philosophical, and theological learning; but on the other hand this lack left him more free. He had no entanglements or preconceptions to hinder him in his quest. He was free to search where he could and to accept what he found.

It seems significant that wherever we look we find man at least recognizing the Divine. In his childlike, intuitive way, he faced the facts of what he saw, and realized that ONLY an infinite, creative Being could be the explanation. No one had yet found how to weave chains of shallow and illogical negation to confuse the mind and frustrate natural faith. Man was all the better off for that, yet these negations mean nothing in the face of experience. To one who has found and experienced the Divine the negative reasoning of unbelief is not even worthy of attention. PEOPLE WHO ARGUE ARE THE ONES WHO ARE NOT QUITE SURE. EXPERIENCE makes one SURE, and when one IS sure ARGUMENT seems a waste of time.

Through the long, harsh, dim ages man slowly worked his way toward civilization. He was in the earlier stages of obeying the divine command to subdue the earth. He was making it possible for others who would live long after his day to make the wilderness blossom as the rose.

A few things he carried with him up these dim, rough slopes of progress - his loves, his hopes, and his haunting faith that back of all the dim unknown a

divine One was standing in the shadow keeping watch above His own. That is significant, for this haunting faith, like the unerring instincts of the animals, pointed truthward. Truth was yet to be elaborated and refined, but primitive man had at least found it in the rough.

The heritage he left has now come down to YOU. The trails he blazed are now fairly well-beaten paths. Perhaps you can help make them open roads, as the faith that haunted man in ancient days shines now with a brighter glow to light you on your way.

III. The Idea of God in the Old Testament.

For that part of our survey from the dawn of civilization to the end of the first Christian century let us take the Bible. We cannot do better, for that body of sacred literature that makes up the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures has for its purpose the tracing of the unfolding of the idea of God during a significant period and the examination of what man has done about it through the centuries.

We now begin to enter more familiar territory. For one thing, we begin to use the name God as a designation for the Divine, though as yet it is only a translation. As we have said, names do not determine identity, but they do sometimes help to explain it.

The earliest Hebrew writings called the Divine by one of two names. One name was Elohim, the first syllable of which lives in the names of many religious places still. The other was a word hard to write or speak, but it is sufficient to call it Yahweh, or Jehovah. The familiar word God is by no means the only possible desirable name, but it is a good one and has the advantage of being generally familiar. One modern translator of the Hebrew Scriptures chooses not to use a proper name at all, but to use the term The Eternal. Take your choice among these and others. The important thing is that it be really the Divine Source and Keeper of all things whom YOU seek.

The divine name appears in the very first sentence of the Old Testament, where we are told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. This sweeping sentence takes us all the way back to the origin of things as we know them. It leaves us standing where primitive man stood, looking at the stars, the trees, the grass, the flowers, the seasons, animal life, and, let us hope, having the good sense to know that there cannot be a creature without a creator. Back of all this wonder we must sense, as he did, a great Power which he recognized as divine, and to which he gave a name. His understanding was vague, it is true, but it was a beginning. Step by step the writer of the Book of Genesis began trying to reconstruct in his mind what the creative process must have been, and anyone who gives his story a sympathetic reading will see that he wrote it with remarkable insight.

As time went on the "Soul of the Universe" was found at times to manifest itself as a personality. Certain men had remarkable experiences of it. These experiences were mysterious to them, but they found it was to their interest to heed the still, small voice when it spoke in their hearts. One man was directed in saving a REMNANT of civilization from the raging destruction of a great flood.

Another was directed to found a new people, another to lead it from captivity.

It was thus that the Hebrew nation came into existence. By that time this great Universal Soul had become rather well-known. It was quite natural for this energetic and ambitious people to designate it as their tribal god, and themselves as his chosen people. That was a step on the way.

Finally a man had an experience with this Divine Spirit that led him into a period of seclusion from which he emerged with the Law which became the charter of the Hebrew religion, and still is. The idea of God had developed to the point of law. That was another step.

The Hebrew prophets of the seventh and eighth centuries, B. C., (nearly 3000 years ago), brought about two more important developments. Some of them began to see that the Divine was not the exclusive property of the Jews, but was universal and infinite. So they began to talk about a future common world life and faith under its authority.

Some also began to see that the God they now knew was more than a legalistic God, that His ways were ways of justice and right, and that His attitude was one of love and compassion. By the time Isaiah wrote of God as like a mother bird hovering near and watching over her young a long step had been taken in the idea of the Divine. In fact the threshold of the Christian interpretation had been reached. It was not far to where the Great Teacher could say, "When ye pray, say our Father". However, the idea of the Divine was to gather force and clearness through later days.

IV. The Idea of God in the New Testament.

At the end of the Old Testament period, human thinking had arrived at the idea of a God of justice and love, but a great difficulty still remained. The idea was still an abstract one, and the human mind is baffled by abstractions. Man depends so much upon his senses that he tends to question what he cannot see, hear, and touch. A demonstration of God was needed. The answer to that need was Jesus of Nazareth, a fuller discussion of whom will be reserved for a later lesson.

However, those parts of the New Testament that deal with the life of Jesus naturally shed a great deal of light on the nature of God. To see in them how He seeks to make His nature so plain that human beings can perceive it even with their physical senses IS A STEP toward a better human understanding of the Divine. It suggests the divine love in the fact that God, like a father, is always striving for a better understanding with His children.

To all this Jesus makes His own contribution. He suggests at the very beginning of His work that God is a parent. That means that He is a personality. He is not speaking in the anthropomorphic sense. He is simply showing how we may approach and experience the Divine.

We are not to seek God like one dodging a policeman, or venturing cautiously near the throne of a frowning potentate. We are to seek Him as a child goes to talk things over with an understanding parent, knowing ever that,

like a good father, He desires only our happiness and good.

Thus we have a MASTER SECRET to use in the WHOLE matter of our approach to an experience of the Divine. Put aside your dread and fear, if you have any. Do you remember some especially satisfying talk with your own father? That is the kind of experience to EXPECT with God. You will not emerge from it frightened and troubled, but HAPPY and FREE.

Later, in a famous talk with a Samaritan woman, Jesus explained that God is not a superman, but a UNIVERSAL SPIRIT. This was the same voice that had told the people on the mount to call God their heavenly Father. How can the two teachings be reconciled? How can a spirit be a person?

That question need not disturb us. We are not called persons because we have this particular PHYSICAL form, but because we have personal traits and qualities. One's BODY is not his personality. It is only the home of his personality. We are persons ONLY because we share some of the qualities of the INFINITE SPIRIT, or SUPREME PERSONALITY. God has given us life, and He protects our lives with His infinite love, wisdom, and power. These are the things that make Him a personality. Without the elements of personality, the things that make us persons too, the Divine would not do these things.

Various scenes of communion between Jesus and the Infinite Being He called His Father in heaven shed much light on the nature of God and carry us forward to a much more advanced idea of what the Divine is like. They are especially numerous in the Gospel of John, especially in the later chapters. Read some of these accounts again, and notice what Jesus says of and to this Being, and the SPIRIT in which He says it.

You will find that they indicate that the human and the Divine are not strangers and enemies, but that they are bound together by the bond of a common life. Jesus indicated that God is IN us and WE in HIM. Did He mean, as the Eastern teachers often say, that the universal Spirit is like the life-giving air? We are in it and it in us. Otherwise life could not continue. Think, O Beloved Companion!

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Is it not strange, then, to suppose that we must go seeking and searching here and there for One who is already "closer to us than breathing, and nearer than hands or feet"? Be assured of this much now, that when you find the Divine, whether the search lasts hours or years, you will find it within yourself. When God finally makes you understand that He is speaking to you, it will not be from a thunder-cloud, but in the quiet chambers of your own heart.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus the disciples, singly and in groups, found themselves having remarkable manifestations of God. One occurred at Pentecost when a group of people, after days of united meditation and prayer, felt themselves so possessed by the divine Spirit that their lives were changed from that time on. They had the great psychological advantage that comes when A GROUP waits and watches WITH ONE ACCORD IN ONE PLACE. These multiply the force of any

spiritual powers at work there.

Peter heard the voice of God in a housetop dream. Paul had remarkable manifestations of Him through a long life of service and up to the day of death in Rome. The Book of Acts is a continual series of accounts of experiences of the Divine as it empowered and led first century Christians in their work.

The New Testament closes with a book that came from the pen of a man who was on an island in the spirit on the Lord's Day. That revelation is a picture of the kind of world this will be when men and God finally dwell and work together in a new heaven and a new earth.

V. The Idea of God since Bible Days.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since the Book of Revelation was written, and they have been years of continued search for and increasing understanding of the Divine. The experiences of the apostles helped it forward while they lived. The days of persecution over, a Roman emperor had an experience which led him to acknowledge and bow to the King of Heaven.

A slowly growing scholarship gradually developed teachers and thinkers who wrote down their thoughts and spread their influence by word of mouth. Books were written by hand and thus accelerated the process a little. Then a German of Mainz developed a printing process which made it possible to spread thought and information quickly and widely. Then came the general circulation of the Bible.

All this helped greatly in advancing the world's progress in understanding the idea of God, but probably the most important discoveries about the Divine were coming, as they so often have in all time, from the common people. Then, as before and since, obscure but earnest people in their own humble, quiet ways were searching for the Divine, having personal experiences of God, and thus becoming better acquainted with Him. Their experiences and discoveries were not announced at the great universities, but they were told to friends and neighbors and became parts of the world's thought about God.

What have such people discovered? They have discovered that many of the accounts and teachings of the Bible itself needed more thought and better interpretation, a thing that is true even yet. They have discovered that even the Great Teacher was not always understood, and is not even yet. They have discovered that God is a greater Being than any of the old concepts indicated, probably a much greater one than anyone realizes even yet. The scholars as well as the "humble and nameless" ones, understand more and more that we have only BEGUN to see how MUCH we mean when we speak of the infinite, universal Spirit, the Divine.

Meanwhile the quest goes on. It is one in which YOU now join. As you do so you become a part of a search that reaches back to the beginnings of the race and forward to the final fulfillment of the divine purpose in the making of a new and better world. YOU COULD NOT JOIN A MORE ILLUSTRIOUS COMPANY, NOR TAKE PART IN A MORE SIGNIFICANT ENTERPRISE.

Every little while someone sees a flash of truth that is different from and MORE than anything yet. Every now and then someone has an experience that sets us FORWARD by giving the world a more adequate idea of God or a better way of seeking one. More people are joining in the quest all the time. They do not all do so publicly, and many of them are never mentioned in the reports. They are everyday people, who CARRY OUT THEIR STUDY along the line of common living and IN TERMS OF DAILY HUMAN EXPERIENCE. That is the BEST way. What they, what YOU are doing and discovering is gradually giving shape to a world faith that will FINALLY EMANCIPATE THE HUMAN RACE.

The methods now being used and the terms in which they are discussed are different from those of former times. (That too is as it should be, for it shows that we are getting on). Religious beliefs must cease to be static and become DYNAMIC. Our ideas and experiences of God must become simpler, more workable, more practical, and more adequate all the time. After all these centuries we are just getting well started. YOU are coming into the effort in its best days thus far.

The value of outlining these past developments in this way is that it enables YOU TO BEGIN where others left off. If the past left no record of its experience, each generation would have to start all over again from the beginning. With the record before you, you need do nothing over. YOU need only to BUILD on the foundations others have laid. The centuries have been getting ready for YOUR work. The past is YOUR PROLOGUE. YOU have no ground to retrace. YOU have only to GRASP THE TORCH AND CARRY IT ON FROM HERE.

The constantly shaping idea of the Divine has been forged on the ringing anvil of human experience. The world does not long remember theories about God, but it never ceases to have interest in EXPERIENCES with God. That is why YOU are asked to build a knowledge of the Divine that does not come from the books but from your OWN HEART.

Do not think your experiences must occur in great places or hours of pageantry. The greatest revelation of all took place in a Bethlehem cattleshed. Any human being makes a good receiving set for the Divine.

Keep tuned; Keep attuned, O Beloved and Trusted, and Tried and True Companion. That which was fore-ordained since the beginning of the world is very near fulfillment within YOU. Many lives and many lifetimes have you spent approaching this TIME. You are VERY NEAR.

May God Strengthen You and Bless You Richly,

Vade Mecum Volventibus Annis,
Your Class Instructor.